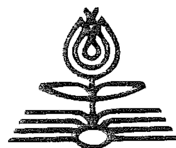
Sith, Slayers, Stargates, + Cyborgs

Modern Mythology in the New Millennium

Edited by David Whitt + John Perlich



PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

"Small World": Alex Proyas' *Dark City* and Omnitopia

Andrew Wood[*]

A woman encounters a stranger at a dock on the river's edge. Looming over them, framing them, the city glows at night. The woman looks over the water; she is fearful that her husband is lost and may not return. The stranger knows this and much more. He possesses a secret knowledge that both the woman and her husband do not know each other at all. Bound up in faked photographs and implanted memories, their love is an experiment concocted for an alien purpose. The stranger understands the experiment because he is one of the researchers. To the woman, the city is a labyrinth that has caught her husband. To the stranger, the city is a laboratory in which people and places are warped, edited, and erased, a place where memory and identity constitute a mutable construct. The stranger visits the woman and toys with her, speaking the words implanted in her husband:

> Mr. Hand: There used to be a ferry when I was a boy. Biggest thing you ever saw, lit up like a floating birthday cake.
> Emma Murdoch: That's just what my husband once said to me, on this very spot.
> Mr. Hand: Where is your husband now?
> Emma Murdoch: I wish I knew. What brings you here?
> Mr. Hand: I met my wife at this place.
> Emma Murdoch: It's where I first met my husband.
> Mr. Hand: Small world.

[*] Dr. Andrew Wood (M.A., Ohio University; Ph.D., Ohio University) is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at San Jose State University.

The world is smaller than he admits. Its limits and purposes stretch no further than the bounds of the city that encloses them both.

This is a scene from *Dark City*, a 1998 film by Alex Proyas that joins Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner* as an indispensable text for students of urbanity in popular culture.[1] With its potent visual iconography and illustration of contemporary trends, *Dark City* offers a cinematic critique of enclavic urbanity that demands closer attention than it has thus far received. Indeed, like its major characters, *Dark City* initially encountered a closed system, a small number of viewers who were drawn to its peculiar convergence of noir detective procedural, psychological thriller, and science fiction effects-fest. The film's plot focuses on an amnesiac accused of murder and his efforts to learn his identity. As he seeks clues about his past, the protagonist encounters a group of "strangers" who possess a startling secret. His struggle with the strangers reveals truths about his character and his world that inspire the audience to question the nature of reality itself. This presumes, of course, that an audience would sit through the film.

A box office flop in the United States, *Dark City* inspired unflattering comparisons to *The Matrix*, despite appearing on screens one year prior to that hit film.[2] However, mirroring the spiraled evolution of *Dark City*'s narrative, the film managed to grow into a cult favorite, aided by rentals, midnight screenings, and film critic Roger Ebert's personal evangelism.[3] Paralleling its popular growth, *Dark City* has also begun to attract international scholarly attention from researchers in American studies (Blackmore, 2004; Gerlach & Hamilton, 2004), cultural studies (Milner, 2004), and media studies (Hayles & Gessler, 2004; Higley 2001; Tripp, 2005), along with English and linguistics (Marsen, 2004). But more work remains to be done, particularly on the film's unique statement about the changing myth of the frontier.

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to this expanding conversation by focusing my attention on *Dark City*'s comment on the changing nature of urbanity. This analysis grows from a larger interest in the role of myth in cinema, the means through which broad ideas of how one should live become encapsulated in iconic figures, tropes, and types—in this case, the frontier and the city. Here, I argue that *Dark City* provides a lens to view contemporary urbanity with its illustration of an enclosure whose inhabitants reside in a kind of daze, manipulated by forces they cannot see. Initially, this analysis requires

a brief overview of the mythical frontier as a counterpoint to the urban maze portrayed by *Dark City*. Following this overview, I employ an omnitopian framework to map out the means though which the frontier has been banished by the cinematic city, leaving in its place an enclave from which one can scarcely hope to escape or even to imagine the possibility of departure. I conclude with remarks on how *Dark City*'s critique of omnitopia, while suggesting a return to the frontier, rests on a troubling implication for heroes who cannot be termed human.

Birth of the Mythical Frontier

Scholarship on the frontier myth almost invariably begins with the "frontier thesis" posited by Frederick Jackson Turner at a meeting of the American Historical Association held at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. Prior to Turner's presentation, the vast majority of historians seeking to uncover the development of the American mind focused their attentions to the nation's European roots. The prevailing wisdom held that America's national identity sprang from its association with the Old World and grew always in relation to that parentage. Turner, in contrast, proposed that the frontier rather than the homeland offers more insight into the New World.[4] Turner differentiated the European and American notions of frontier: the former referred to a heavily guarded boundary; the latter indicated the line demarcating freedom from convention. Rather than separating two established entities, the American frontier opened up possibilities beyond what had been established. Consequently, those who pursued the frontier did not seek to protect the conventional order but rather faced adversities and overcame challenges in a manner best illustrated by the persona of the frontiersman. While often quoted, this passage by Turner offers apt illustration:

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier. (p. 37)

Turner's thesis concludes by announcing the *closing* of the frontier due to the nation's rapid urbanization, further differentiating urban

and unsettled America.[5]

To Turner's nineteenth-century listeners and readers, the bright and open spaces of the frontier suggested an immediate contrast to the dominant myths of urbanity that they held. To the Victorian mind, the urban core was truly a "dark city," a container of dangers and terrors that threatened the souls of its inhabitants. Narrow streets, unlit alleys, violent crime, and anonymous "strangers" resulted in chaotic moments and social confusions. Whereas in the mythical countryside one knew one's neighbors and, by extension, one's "place," the city exploded all norms. Each footfall along its arcades and busy boulevards resulted in chance encounters with no guiding narrative or consistent patterns to follow. Brimming with immigrants and bursting with chock-a-block growth, the city was a maze, a labyrinth, a trap. As a physical and rhetorical site of contrast, the frontier revealed the possibility to escape the city and seek personal transformation.

Within the field of communication studies, Turner's students and advocates, along with historians of his legacy, eventually carved out their own place to explore the impact of the frontier myth upon American oratory and media. In his 1941 essay "The Speech of the Frontier," Edward Everett Dale announced the need for communication scholars to study the impact of the sometimes salty but frequently shrewd frontier discourse on contemporary speech.[6] A year later, Robert D. Clark (1942) offered a somewhat more sophisticated reminder of the impression of frontier talk on the great political speakers in American history.[7] But it was Ronald H. Carpenter who most convincingly and thoroughly explored the frontier myth from the standpoint of communication scholarship. Carpenter (1977) examines that rare phenomenon of a piece of scholarship by a seemingly unknown historian inspiring national discussion and altering the common conception of the American identity.[8] Inspired by his contribution while departing from Carpenter's historigraphic emphasis, Janice Hocker Rushing (1983, 1986, 1989) launched a mini-revival of communication scholarship on the frontier in the 1980s with articles that explored mediated manifestations of the frontier myth. Importantly, she inspired the transition of attention from the Old Frontier (the "West") to the New Frontier (space).

Of particular interest to this chapter, Rushing offers insight into efforts to transplant Western themes into urban settings, as epitomized by the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*. She notes that this type of

film attempts to "modernize" frontier life for contemporary audiences, "[b]ut urban life lacks space and thrives on industry; both conditions are anathema to the wandering soul of the West, free of technology and at one with nature" (p. 266). Here, Rushing emphasizes that the frontier, whether old or new, rests on a dichotomy between desert and town (and, within the town, the brothel and the schoolhouse). In this manner, the frontier demands a counterpoint—the home, the city, the hometown—for its definition. Conversely, urbanity requires the frontier—the desert, the ocean, the outback—as its own mythical counterpoint. Yet, as I elaborate below, contemporary urbanity seems to have rid itself of the frontier. Rather than an external barrier (or even a permeable membrane), an emerging model of urban life relies on a perpetual "hereness" that eludes the possibility of a "there." I refer to that practice and perception as omnitopia, a term that requires further explication.

Omnitopia and the End of the Frontier Myth

Omnitopia enacts a structural and perceptual enclave whose apparently distinct locales convey inhabitants to a singular place. Etymologically, the term reflects a neologism of the Latin *omni* (all; "in all ways or places" or "of all things") and the Greek *topos* (place).[9] Omnitopia reflects a different kind of place than its cousins, utopia and heterotopia. Utopia refers to a fictional site coined in 1516 by Thomas More, an impossible place (not-place) conceived to critique the social conditions of its author. Heterotopia refers to Michel Foucault's (1986) formulation of a paradoxical place that encloses and relieves social tensions.[10] While utopia is strictly limited to the imagination of one who critiques social life, heterotopia refers to a complex site such as a theme park, graveyard, or motel that acts as a safety value to affirm social order, even while admitting multiple and contradictory narratives. While its lineage emerges from utopia and heterotopia, omnitopia differs from these two concepts in one essential way. Rather than evoking an imaginary locale or a distinct place, omnitopia reflects the practice and perception of multiple locations being accessed through a single site. Put another way, omnitopia posits the shrinking of human geography into a singularity in which any place becomes every place and every place is the same.

As a framework, omnitopia continues to evolve past its initial limitations. The term was introduced first in an essay on airport architecture (Wood, 2003a) before its application to *The Simpsons'* depiction of Springfield (Wood & Todd, 2005), early strategies employed by "Mom and Pop" motels to craft a sense of place along the highway (Wood, 2005a), and the construction of tourist enclaves in sites such as Las Vegas (Wood, 2005b). Through a process of development and delineation enabled by these latter three essays, omnitopia has revealed itself as being far more complex than the homogeneous and interchangeable gates of the international airport. Recalling his 1984 circumnavigation through various airport enclosures, essayist Clive James noted that "the world had grown smaller without necessarily becoming bland" (1989, p. 362). Cracks and fissures inevitably cut through the monolithic façade. A manifestation of late modern capitalism, omnitopia flows like mercury, a silvery liquid that transforms natural and artificial terrains into reflections of its presence. Though often toxic, the strategies of omnitopia manage to craft a paradoxical place that is local and universal, personal and alienating. Gazing beyond the mere reflection of omnitopian practices, we must excavate fundamental practices. To that end, this essay offers a rereading of *Dark City* as an exemplar of five omnitopian strategies: dislocation, mobility, conflation, fragmentation, and mutability.[11] As discussed later, these practices reflect the evolving relationship of the frontier and urban life.

Dislocation

Dislocation removes a site from its surrounding environment. In doing so, this strategy constructs a separate enclave that offers a synecdoche of the world marked by a limited range of experiences. Dislocation may be best illustrated by those iconic sites of late modern capitalism: the airport, the enclosed shopping mall, and the casino. For practical reasons, of course, each site must be separated from the external world. Airports require security fences; enclosed shopping malls protect their inhabitants from the elements, and casinos seek to focus their consumers' attentions on the gambling opportunities within. But in a larger sense, each of these attempts a kind of cocooning that reflects a new urban aesthetic: the power to isolate ourselves from others. By way of further illustration, consider the ubiquitous iPod (and other types of personal media devices), which allows its

users to create an even more snug enclosure, an aural enclave. With this device, people carry with them their "world" of media—images, songs, movies, data files—and are able to disassociate themselves from the world "outside." Offering a world within a world, dislocation removes the locale from its human and physical geography, constructing a shopping mall-like enclosure. In *Dark City*, we encounter a nearly perfect example of dislocation, given that city residents are literally separated from their world, with no view of the frontier that divides them.[12]

Dark City presents an American metropolis where the sun never shines. But the city is, in fact, a self-contained enclosure where aliens known as "the strangers" experiment upon abducted people in hopes of understanding the unique capabilities of human beings.[13] This truth is hidden from the human inhabitants. But one, a character named John Murdoch, begins to recognize the unreal nature of his urban habitat. He wakes up in a gloomy hotel room and discovers a murdered prostitute, a bloodstained knife, and an unknown face in the mirror. Murdoch cannot remember his name or recall what led him to this place. He does not think he killed the prostitute, but he cannot be sure. This opening scene launches the film's plot, in which Murdoch searches the city for answers while police detectives search for him. In their stumbles through the urban scene, characters discover the detached nature of their surroundings.

Throughout the film, characters are dislocated from their place of origin and confined in a seemingly impenetrable labyrinth marked by two types of imagery: spirals and aquarium enclosures. Spiral imagery includes the film's opening credit graphics, the twisting carve caused by the murder weapon, a doctor's circular maze, and several pertinent pieces of narrative. In one, the chief inspector speaks to a detective, Frank Bumstead: "This killer's been running circles around us." Later, Bumstead spots circular mazes in the home and office of a colleague, Eddie Walenski, who has gone mad in his efforts to understand the true nature of the city: "spending time in the subway, riding in circles, thinking in circles." Throughout the film, Murdoch, Bumstead, and Walenski struggle to make sense of their world. But continually they confront signs of the spiral—spinning clocks, turning chairs, the shape and layout of the city itself.

Along with spirals, the film employs aquariums to emphasize the role of surveillance in this alien habitat. In the movie's opening scenes, Murdoch accidentally breaks a small fish bowl but rescues the